Review
Reviewed Work(s): A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan; Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered by Thomas Daniel Young
Review by: CHARLES BOHNER
Source: *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Fall 1983), pp. 603-606

A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years, edited by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982. 191 pp.; *Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered,* by Thomas Daniel Young. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982. 90 pp.

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE a book comes along with a title that catches the popular fancy and supplies a slogan for those who may never read a line of the text. *The Revolt of the Masses* is an example of such a title. *Small Is Beautiful* is another. The authors of these works are, at least in part, victimized by their own cleverness, for their titles are seized upon by those who want not a reasoned argument but a battle cry.

Such is the case with *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition,* the collection of essays published in 1930 by "Twelve Southerners." The title, with its obvious allusion to the Confederate anthem, seems to say it all—the contributors will "live and die" for an agrarian "Dixie." And many of the early reviewers took the title at face value, much to the irritation of the twelve. One of them, Donald Davidson, was soon complaining that *I'll Take My Stand* was the "most misunderstood *unread* book in American literature."

If the title turned out to be a misnomer, the authors had only themselves to blame. They had been squabbling about it

almost from the beginning of the enterprise. John Donald Wade suggested it, and while the guiding spirits of the collection—Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Frank Lawrence Owsley, and Lyle Lanier—were lukewarm, nobody seemed to be able to come up with anything better.

But the Young Turks connected with the project were outraged. Robert Penn Warren called the title "the Goddamndest thing I ever heard of" and implored Allen Tate to block it. But he was too late. The publisher insisted the title stand because the book had already been advertised as *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition.* (Nobody seems to have noted the irony that a book attacking commercial culture should have been compromised at the outset by a Northern bookseller worried about sales.) Tate had to content himself with a footnote expressing the fear that the title would not "adequately and truthfully" express the views of the contributors. He had the rueful satisfaction of being proved correct. No sooner was the book launched by Harpers than Tate was writing: "I observe that [one reviewer] today on the basis of the title defines our aims as an 'agrarian revival' and reduces our real aims to nonsense." He concluded, "My melancholy is profound."

I'll Take My Stand is a splendid title—memorable, militant, heroic. For the twelve Southerners it lacked only one necessary element—accuracy. It did not describe the book they had put together. But what title would? The circumstances of making the book had virtually guaranteed that it would lack unity. The authors, representing many disciplines, were scattered from Nashville to Paris. They never met for a single planning session, and several of them never met at all. They neglected to appoint a fulltime editor. Individual essays as printed did not have the approval of all the contributors. Not until two-thirds of the essays were written and submitted did several of the organizers get around to drawing up a statement of principles. Finally, these leaderless authors negotiated simultaneously with two New York publishers only to find themselves, to their great embarrassment, committed to both firms.

In all this there is a strong whiff of comedy. The original impulse for *I'll Take My Stand* was a desire to counteract the

bad press the South was getting in the North, and there is something delightfully quixotic about these twelve Southerners trying to deploy their troops for a new battle of the books. Professor Thomas Daniel Young, however, treats the story reverentially in *Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered.* "Few books in the literature of America," he concludes, "confront the problems that have eternally plagued its citizens—problems that are elusive and paradoxical to the point of insolubility—in a manner so provocative and compelling as *I'll Take My Stand.*" That is high praise indeed, and it applies to *Walden* certainly, and to Henry Adams's *Education.* But to *I'll Take My Stand?* Professor Young should reread his own specific and sensible comments on the book. He considers the quality of the writing "very uneven." He sees "little or no unity in the collection." The specific essays range in his opinion from "very good to barely passable." The most he will say in favor of the title is that it gives a "semblance" of unity. He finds only six of the twelve essays worthy of discussion, dismissing the remaining six in a paragraph. Finally, he writes, "To my knowledge no other book of its kind in twentieth-century literature offers as many different kinds of argument in defense of a single principle." I suppose that is intended as praise. But my own feeling is that, as with the wonder diets that flood the market, the more solutions proposed for a problem, the less likelihood that any one of them will do.

Waking Their Neighbors Up is the text of the Lamar Lectures delivered by Professor Young at Mercer University in 1980 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *I'll Take My Stand.* The same motive prompted *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years,* the record of a symposium held at Vanderbilt University in the fall of 1980. The university, wishing to pay homage to its distinguished sons, invited six scholars sympathetic to agrarian values to reconsider *I'll Take My Stand.* Readers of this journal will be familiar with such academic festivals and will find this book pretty much what they expect it to be—graceful, respectful, unexceptionable. The three survivors of the agrarian wars—Lyle Lanier, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren—were on hand for the celebration. The transcript of their witty, wide-ranging, and humane

conversation on the last day of the symposium is a reminder of the talent and the character of a remarkable group of men.

University of Delaware CHARLES BOHNER